

The early history of religion (dis)proving its truth

Historical argument in Theodore Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār

The first Church father writing in Arabic, Theodore Abu Qurrah, and the first Muslim author to compose a systematic refutation of Christianity, ‘Abd al-Jabbar, both apply the historical argument in order to prove or refute the truth of Christianity. Both agree that the first followers of a religion represent an ideal way of following their religion. Abu Qurrah argued that Christianity is the true religion because its first followers were persecuted, poor and non-violent; ‘Abd al-Jabbar argued to prove that Islam is the true religion because its first followers had the divine authority to conquer and plunder. However, he had to reconstruct the history of early Christendom thoroughly to prove that it is a violent, immoral and thus a false religion. At times, Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār look at the same facts from opposing perspectives; at times, they appear to have a similar perspective, but to be looking at different facts.

AT THE TIME OF ISLAMIC CONQUESTS, the Orthodox Church in the Middle East had experienced *circa* three centuries of persecution, followed by another three centuries of dominion. Its new status under Islamic rule as a subjugated group meant that it underwent another profound transformation of identity. The most important factor contributing to this identity transformation was a change in the relation between the Church and the state, which in turn had effects on its self-understanding and on the estimation of values and ideals. Consequently, the transformation of identity was reflected in a change of approach to history and its significance. And, *vice versa*, views of history constituted a lucid means of estimating deeper changes in identity.

The transformation of Christian identity in the Islamic context is clearly visible already in the work

of the earliest-known Christian Orthodox author writing in Arabic,¹ Theodore Abū Qurrah (d. c. 830), who exercised historical argument in his polemical writings, produced at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries. His approach to history contains an emphasis that was almost forgotten in Byzantium. In his writings, the character of early Christian history was a decisive argument for the divine truth of Christianity – namely, the outward *weakness* of the early Church.

The earliest preserved Islamic systematic treatise to refute Christianity was written around two centuries later. In the work known as *Tathbīt Dalā’il Nubuwwat Sayyidinā Muhammad*, the author responds to many claims found in the work of Abū Qurrah and other Christian apologists. The identity of this author is by no means certain, but for the sake of convenience I resort to the name we have – ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 AD). He is known as a widely-read Sunni Muslim humanist, a Mu’tazilite and a follower of the Shafi’i school (see Stroumsa 1999: 59–61; Reynolds 2004). It must be admitted, however, that *Tathbīt* does not represent a specifically Mu’tazilite approach to theology but resorts to rather more colourful expressions and frank rhetoric. The text does bear some resemblance to the strictness of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s critique of Christianity in *Kitāb al-muḥīṭ* (see Chiesa 2009: 264–8), but *Tathbīt* is much simpler and less scholastic.

The questions dealing with dogmatic topics and holy scripts in the early Christian–Muslim encounter are rather well known and much studied (e.g.,

1 Some texts, like the famous *On the Triune Nature of God* (Sinai Arabic 154) are somewhat earlier, but their authors are unknown.

Rissanen 1993; Tamcke 2007). In the following, I concentrate on a less studied matter: the use of historical argument in polemics. Namely, just as Abū Qurrah did, ‘Abd al-Jabbār utilized the history of early Christianity at the core of his argumentation, but he did it in order to show its fallibility. My aim is to analyse how Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār used historical arguments in their confirmations and refutations of Christianity. The arguments deal with questions of power, authority, violence, honour and humiliation, as well as linguistic aspects in the formation of religious identity. Most of these are crystallised in the question of motives and the reasons behind conversion.

In addition to the explicit contents of the arguments, it is essential to discover the presuppositions underlying them: why a given historical fact – true or imagined – is positive or negative, proving truthfulness or unreliability, perfection or imperfection. Since both authors are extremely selective in their use of facts, be they historical or invented ones, this meta-level is in fact the decisive dimension of the discourse: facts can always be found, or produced, but the axiomatic fundamentals that dictate the quality of a given fact are essential in constituting the basic ethos of the discourse.

Both authors share the conception that the earliest phases of a religion are crucial for determining its truthfulness. The logic runs as follows: if a religion is God-given, why would God allow it to go astray from the beginning? Therefore, its first followers represent an ideal way of following a religion; it may not be perfect in every detail, but the basic lines should be definitive and authoritative. In terms of theological logic, the view is coherent as such, and the argument appears meaningful, if it is not applied in an extreme manner.

Of course, there is the difficulty of differentiating the real historical developments from later idealised images of early history, but for our line of questioning this problem is a secondary one. Specifically, in estimating what our ninth–eleventh century authors understood to be the criteria of truth and how they used historical argumentation, it is essential to analyse the *history as they saw it*. In other words, if modern scholarship provides alternative ways of understanding the emergence of these two religions, it does not change the way in which Christians and Muslims have understood their own religion, and each other’s religion, in history.

Evidently, both authors reflect actual claims, questions and challenges made by the other side.² Abū Qurrah quotes some challenging questions and possible objections that would make little sense in intra-Christian discussion, and many of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s claims seem to be direct reactions to the views emphasised by Abū Qurrah and other Christian apologists. It is likely that ‘Abd al-Jabbār had himself read Abū Qurrah; at least his unquestionably genuine writings mention ‘Qurrah the Melkite’ by name (*Mughni* 144; Thomas 2009: 385).

Background: contrasting religions’ beginnings

To compare and contrast the first Christians with the first Muslims, and to polarise the Christian martyrs with the religiously authorised warfare of Islam, is not a recent innovation. It is a method already present in some of the very first Christian writings on Islam – in sources that are older than Islamic historiography or formulations of *jihād* in the Sharia. It suffices to have a brief look at a few examples from the various traditions of the Christian Orient.

In the Coptic *Homily on the Child Saints of Babylon*, dating possibly to around 640, there is a short section in which the first propagators of Christianity are contrasted with the first propagators of Islam. The apostles were poor and hungry; the early Muslim conquerors oppress, massacre, give themselves up to prostitution and take Christians into captivity. Nevertheless, what is unexpected and odd for the author is not these acts as such, but the religious attitude connected with them. According to this homily, Muslims committed these acts with pride and good conscience, declaring: ‘We both fast and pray’ (*Hom. Bab.* §36).

Some years later, the Armenian author Sebeos was the first to discuss the motives of Arab invaders. Basing his views on what he was told by runaway war prisoners, Sebeos described how the early Muslims believed that God had promised the earth to them

2 For example, Abū Qurrah quotes questions that would not occur to Christians themselves: ‘Suppose someone says: The Gentiles accepted Christianity not through the power of God and his wonders, but because Paul and his associates led him astray’ (*That Christianity is from God*, D 265). ‘Abd al-Jabbār may even state explicitly: ‘We heard this from someone who argues on their behalf and speaks for them’ (*Tathbīt* 2:22).

and that none would be able to resist them in battle. Sebeos did not explicitly compare them with the early Christians, but the description of the religious motives is nevertheless important; in fact, Sebeos did not condemn or criticise these motives; he merely affirmed them (*Seb.* 95–102).

In Greek literature, one may note that the very first estimation of Islam, *Doctrina Jacobi*, composed in 634, defines the status of Muhammad and his mission in relation to Jewish and Christian history, albeit briefly and almost implicitly. According to the author, Muhammad is a false prophet because ‘the prophets do not come armed with a sword. Truly they are works of anarchy being committed today’ (*Doc. Jac.* 5:16, p. 209).

In Syriac literature, there is no lack of examples. *Disputation of a Muslim and the Monk of Bet Hālē*, an East Syrian Christian work, initially dated to the 720s, and then rather convincingly by Taylor to Abū Qurrah’s time (790s), contains a number of claims and challenges encountered by the Christians. Interestingly, the Muslim character proves the divine truth of Islam by means of its military success and ability to repress others:

And this is the sign that God loves us, and is pleased with our religion, that he has given us authority over all faiths and all peoples. And behold, they are our slaves and subjects! (*Disp. Bet Hālē* §9)

Obviously, there was agreement on the fact that such a sign existed. The difference was about the meaning of this sign.

Motives for conversion in early Christianity and Islam

Approximately half of Abū Qurrah’s published Arabic works deal with Islam. His main interest in these writings is not in the sacred scripts, doctrines, liturgical life, or in any actual contents of religion, but on the *motives for accepting religions*. This unusual emphasis is due to the circumstances of his time: for the first time in history there were substantial mass conversions away from Christianity. In writings such as *That Christianity is from God*, *On the Confirmation of the Gospel* and *On the Characteristics of the True Religion* Abū Qurrah concentrates on the reasons, motives and qualifications of choosing a religion. How does one accept a religion? What are the justifi-

able and appropriate motives for this? For what kind of motives should a person not change their religion? Even his text *On the Trinity* discusses these questions at length. Obviously, the main pastoral challenge in Abū Qurrah’s time was that Christians were abandoning their religion in large numbers for reasons that seemed secondary, unthinking and inconsiderate.

Against this reality, Abū Qurrah highlighted the ascetic poverty of the apostles and the lack of outward benefit associated with accepting Christianity in their times. The argument of outer humility as an indicator of the inner truth of Christianity had perhaps somewhat fallen into background in the Imperial Church of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire. For the Oriental Churches, this ethos was still predominant. Outer humility and inner luminosity did remain a spiritual ideal even in Byzantium, however, and the fathers did retain the principle of Church’s independence from the state and its emperors.³

In Abū Qurrah’s reading of the history of the early Church, it is essential that Christianity was not accepted for any material gain or even for social reasons. The apostles

had in this world neither wealth or dwelling nor place of refuge, neither two pieces of clothing nor food for two days, not even a bag, nothing that people would follow them in hope of receiving something (D 262).

These details do have explicit support in Gospels and Acts, though they are perhaps presented here as exaggerated caricature. However, Abū Qurrah proceeds further and claims that the apostles were uneducated peasants with no learning, so that no one could be persuaded by their earthly wisdom. The idea was not unknown in Byzantine homiletics (John Chrysostom, *Hom. John* 1), and even in the wordings of the New Testament the apostles were uneducated (ἀγράμματοι) and ignorant (ἰδιῶται, Acts 4:13), but Abū Qurrah goes on to claim even that there was no one among them who knew how to write!⁴ Moreover,

3 The exceptions (emperors interfering in the affairs of the Church) have received a lot of attention exactly because they are against the ideals and in that sense exceptional, even though not unusual in the capital.

4 This view is curiously reminiscent of the Islamic tradition that presents Muhammad as illiterate in order to underline the miraculous nature of the Qur’an.



Apostles receiving the Holy Spirit. Armenian miniature painting. Gospel book illuminated by Mesrop of Khizan, 1386.

he seems to scorn the basic teachings of Christianity that are impossible to accept on basis of mere intelligent reflection: they are too paradoxical and illogical for a philosophical taste, and even more so for a vulgar one (D 262–3). ‘Neither the wise, the ignorant, nor those in between could be persuaded to accept such things.’ Curiously, he underlines the absurdity of Christianity more than many of its opponents in order to illustrate the miraculous character of its expansion. In short, there is not a single rational reason for the nations to start ‘to worship this man who was in outward appearance a Jew’ (B 73–4).

Abū Qurrah even presented a very unusual challenge for Muslims: let their wisest man learn the Christian doctrine and go to Sudan or India, and let him try to convert people to Christianity! Abū Qurrah’s argument is that the Christian religion is ethically so demanding and rationally so absurd that no one would ever accept it without heavenly assistance and divine miracles, and since many have converted in history, one may conclude that these have taken place (D 268–9). Elsewhere, he also argues that

Christianity alone was accepted in its early history in a deliberate and prudent way, not for satisfying passions or because of deception; moreover, the consideration of these very motives enables one to accept Christianity, and only Christianity, in a rational and reasonable way (B 26–7).

In addition, Abū Qurrah stresses that the basic message of Christianity (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection etc.) was novel and unheard of (D 263). This is to imply that Islam does not offer anything new but rather represents a regression to primitive beliefs and practices.

Moreover, Abū Qurrah pointed at the ascetic emphasis of the early Church – the apostles did not permit anyone to give in to the appetites, glories and delights of the world, nor to ‘many women’, but taught instead that the ‘things of the world must be wholly abandoned’ (D 263). Abū Qurrah contrasts this fervently with Islam, even though he never mentions Islam explicitly in such contexts but aims to speak about religions on a general level. In *On the Confirmation of the Gospel*, he defines four inappropriate and inadequate motives for accepting untrue religions: ‘permissiveness (*rakhs*), might (‘*uzz*), tribal zeal (*ta‘aşşub*) and persuasion of vulgar (*sūqī*) minds’ (B 71). The idea is that if someone converts to a religion that permits lustful behaviour, grants positions of power and prestige, is based on tribal zeal, or is pleasing to vulgar taste, there is nothing spiritual or divine in the process.

Other motives counted by Abū Qurrah as inadequate to determine what religion one should follow, include those based on fear, such as the ‘sword’ and the ‘power of human beings’, ‘their ability to compel others, their use of tricks, or their appeals to ambition’. Specifically, some had converted after having been taken as prisoners in war and brought to slavery, or were forced by some other kind of oppression (see Simonsohn 2017: 199–205). Most of the motives, however, seem to represent earthly advantages, such as worldly gifts, access to the upper classes, or religious freedom. Moreover, Abū Qurrah argues that some may submit to a noble or rich person because of his nobility or wealth, not because of the sublimity of the truth represented by his religion. Or people may adopt a religion that enables them to follow their desires or attain pleasures. Furthermore, Abū Qurrah admits that some may be charmed by wisdom and an intellectually agreeable doctrine, especially if the account of God is simple and agreeable to common

folk and vulgar minds (B 25–6, 71–3; D 259–60). In effect, the critique is a list of motives for conversion to Islam in 800 AD, as seen through the eyes of an Orthodox bishop.

With the help of these inadequate motives for conversion, one may define the true religion that is exactly the opposite. That is to say, religion is ‘true, divine and correct’ if it is accepted for none of these reasons. For Abū Qurrah, Christianity is the only religion that has spread to the whole world in spite of its ethical and rational difficulty and lack of benefits – a historical argument.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that a Christian author finds Christianity to be the true religion; but the fact that he concludes this on the basis of motives for conversion was a somewhat new emphasis, compared with the theology of previous centuries. Simply put, his premise is that any kind of compulsion invalidates a religion, and since the conversion to the early Church took place freely and willingly, even amidst difficulties, the character of the early history of religion has become a criterion for its truthfulness. In the case of Christianity, conversion was not only freely willed, but it even took place in spite of the persecutions. This idea can be traced back to the Christian Middle East of pre-Islamic times. In Antioch, John Chrysostom in his homilies against the Judaizers described the endless means of torture that were used against the Christians but which could not destroy the Church, or even weaken it. This was extraordinary, he argued, precisely because the persecutions occurred at the very beginning, before the Gospel message had taken root in society (*Adv. Jud.* 5.2.8–9).

In addition, Abū Qurrah parallels the cases of improperly motivated conversion with the worship of the golden statue in Babylon: people did not consider seriously what the truth was or what it was not, but simply acted as the authorities demanded, instead of thinking for themselves. The argument also connects the conversions to Islam with biblical history and adds some dramatic flavour to the decision of not converting.

This leads to another of Abū Qurrah’s main arguments: Islam offers nothing new but represents a degeneration to what has been before, long before the emergence of Christianity. Interestingly, ‘Abd al-Jabbār would gladly admit the claim of return, but he would label it as a positive phenomenon. For Abū



Former Orthodox cathedral of St. John the Forerunner in Damascus, converted into mosque by the Umayyad Caliphs at the beginning of the eighth century. Photo: alazaat, 2008.

Qurrah, the history of Christianity was a slow and painstaking *evolution* towards a more refined, more ethical and more aesthetic religion (e.g. *Ikrām*, ch. 18); for ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the change as such was admitted but interpreted as a *regression* towards superstition, idolatry and filthiness (e.g., *Tathbīt* 3:29–30). Nevertheless, both do underline the essential significance of the transformation that took place during the early centuries of Christianity, whether positive or negative.

For ‘Abd al-Jabbār, it suffices to show that a given practice has developed *after* the time of Christ, and this inherently proves that it is wrong and represents regression. For example, the famous vision of St Peter in Acts 11 traditionally served as justification for eating certain non-kosher meats. For Abū Qurrah the existence of such a text proves that the Christian practice is right, since the change had taken place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but for ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the same reading proves that it is wrong, since it describes a mistaken procedure (*Tathbīt* 3:673–81).

From the methodological point of view, it is remarkable that Abū Qurrah is reluctant to discuss any details of Islam, such as particular verses of the Qur’an:⁵ Islam represents for him a primitive form of religion by its paradigm, and thus it is rather irrelevant for him to estimate the quality of any detached

5 For the Christian use of Qur’an in other contexts, see Griffith (1999).

details. Moreover, a detailed critique of Qur'anic lore might arouse accusations of blasphemy.

In other words, the difference in paradigms makes it impossible to reach any decisive conclusions from such actual historical events or processes, since the same phenomena may be viewed positively or negatively, depending on one's values, ideals and postulates. This in turn makes the *motives* of conversion an even more relevant question, for they are directly connected to values and ideals. Abū Qurrah summed up his main argument on Christianity as a historical phenomenon: 'it was through the power of God that this religion was accepted by the Gentiles, without taint of human power or tricks, permissiveness or ambition' (D 265). This is why Christianity must be the only true religion. This is a more difficult line of argumentation for 'Abd al-Jabbār, for it could not be dealt with merely by labelling it as regression. In his counter-narrative, he did not challenge the basic view that such a history *would* prove the divine truth behind the events. Instead, he chose to rewrite the Christian history.

The history of early Christianity in 'Abd al-Jabbār

It is hard to deny that the universal success of religion is a weighty argument in itself. 'God would not permit a false faith to prevail over all the extremities of the earth,' argued Anastasios of Sinai in the seventh century (*Dial.* 1224B). In Abū Qurrah's time, however, this line of thought was disappearing, and Christians no longer expected the Islamic empire to collapse. Therefore, the Christians resorted to the quality of religion instead of quantity in determining its truthfulness.

For Abū Qurrah, the divine character of Christianity is visible in the way in which it spread during the persecutions in spite of the fact that conversion could offer no material gains or advantages. In a similar manner, other Christian apologists of the Abbasid era, such as Hunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873), argued that the truth of Christianity can be seen in the fact that it is not established by political coercion or compulsion (*Risāla* 178; Reynolds 2004: 88).

'Abd al-Jabbār had to face this claim somehow, and he chose to rewrite history thoroughly. In his view, the very first Christians may have been powerless in society, but for this very reason, they chose to *sell* their religious ideals and accept Roman practices instead, in order to gain power.

'Abd al-Jabbār seems to have known the line of argument represented by Abū Qurrah very well. He even quotes Christian claims that 'great nations and kings have accepted (Christianity) with no compulsion, sword, coercion, or constraint' (*Tathbīt* 3:372). However, since he denies the actual claim so strongly, he seems to admit the premise that acceptance of religion without compulsion or miraculous reasons would imply true spirituality and perhaps even validate it.

In 'Abd al-Jabbār's rewritten history, there was no real persecution at all; the Christians rather had hastily made a deal with Romans and agreed to make alterations to their religion: they changed the direction of prayer⁶ and abolished the Law of Torah (*Tathbīt* 3:11-36) in order to get benefits from the empire.⁷ The Christians who suffered martyrdom, 'Abd al-Jabbār claims, were only a couple of small groups that refused to compromise with the mainstream (*Tathbīt* 3:70-1). In other words, his basic claim was that also the Christians had adopted their religion for material gains and out of fear.

The rewriting process is bold and straightforward. 'Abd al-Jabbār took the processes that took place in Christianity *circa* 35-50 AD – the ones that gave birth to a new religion – and relocated them to somewhere around the end of fourth century, or vice versa, purposefully confusing the two eras. This in fact implies that 'Abd al-Jabbār accepted the idea that it would be miraculous for a religion to spread widely amidst persecutions; thus, he chose to repudiate and retell the historical events rather than argue for the natural character of the phenomenon.

Thus the history of the persecuted early church was so difficult challenge that 'Abd al-Jabbār chose to delete it completely from history. Consequently, he set the Apostle Paul to Constantinople (*sic*) where he was plotting with the emperor, inciting the Byzantines against the Jews (*Tathbīt* 3:125-36). 'Abd al-Jabbār also blamed Paul for adopting Roman practices such

6 'Abd al-Jabbār claims repeatedly that the Romans used to pray facing the rising sun, and this is what Paul and Christians adopted long after the time of Christ. The custom is in fact one of the earliest things known about Christians and documented already in *Didache*. See *Tathbīt* 87 [11], 93 [63-4].

7 Here of course, the historical truth was the opposite: Christians ended up being persecuted rather because they dissociated themselves from Judaism which was a lawful religion.

as monogamy or permitting women to appear in public without veils. ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s Paul is a character who introduced all the possible customs of the Romans to the Christian faith and ‘did not oppose them in anything’ (*Tathbīt* 3:137-46).

In this manner, ‘Abd al-Jabbār *de facto* deleted the entire first three centuries from history, claiming that when the Byzantines (*al-rūm*) overcame the Israelites and established their dominion from Egypt to Mesopotamia, they ‘imposed this religion on people through desire and terror’ (*Tathbīt* 3:910). In other words, there was hardly any Church of the martyrs at all; rather the history of Christian Byzantium seems to start directly after the fall of Jerusalem. At the same time, ‘Abd al-Jabbār locates the origin of Christianity with Constantine the Great (*Tathbīt* 3:657, 608). This peculiar solution shows how difficult and serious the challenge was. In short, ‘Abd al-Jabbār claims that the Romans never become Christians: it was Christians who became Romans (i.e. Byzantines).

In terms of basic facts, both make clear mistakes. Abū Qurrah implies that almost all the gentile nations had largely already converted to Christianity in the apostolic times; ‘Abd al-Jabbār claims that the conversions took place in the era of the imperial Church only. The historical truth, of course, includes both: a good portion of the population did convert to Christianity in wide areas during the era of persecutions, which may well be considered somewhat extraordinary and unexpected, if not miraculous, as Abū Qurrah argues, but still the great mass converted mostly during the fourth and fifth centuries, albeit with no imperial intimidation. Details of the process, however, seem to have varied from one district to another. Nevertheless, historical details have rather little relevance for our authors, who either exaggerate them (Abū Qurrah) or substantially confuse them (al-Jabbār).

In terms of rationality, ‘Abd al-Jabbār is more successful in pointing out some other weaknesses in the Christian reasoning. He points out that if the Christian claims concerning demanding moral standards, plentiful miracles, asceticism and abjuring the sword are taken as definitive criteria in identifying the true religion, the Christians should convert to Manicheism, the Indian religions, or even Zoroastrianism (*Tathbīt* 3:513-40). Namely, these put forward similar claims, and the Indian religions have a much longer history and stricter forms of asceticism. This observation is interesting, for it

shows not only how difficult it is to define the characteristics of the true religion, but also the fact that the Christian criteria were *relative* by character: at best, they might function in relation to Islam but not necessarily Manicheism or Hinduism. (On the other hand, Manicheism never expanded in the way that Christianity did, and Hinduism’s quantity is not based on conversions.)

‘Abd al-Jabbār’s vigorous stand against Christianity is illustrated by the fact that even though he allows miracles, asceticism and lack of compulsion for other religions, including Judaism, he decisively denies that Christianity has exhibited any of these and claims instead that Christianity has been spread by means of ‘coercion, constraint and the sword, from its beginning until the present day’ (*Tathbīt* 3:541-5). And even further, ‘there is no religion that incites evil, encourages indecency, and excites wickedness more than Christianity’ (*Tathbīt* 3:577). ‘Abd al-Jabbār argues that Christianity *de facto* incites all kinds of wickedness because of it lacks punishments, such as those found in the Sharia, and propagates forgiveness and easily obtained remission instead.

The extremely strict sexual ethos of early Christendom was reversed by ‘Abd al-Jabbār into a state of immorality in which nothing is forbidden: all varieties of sexual misbehaviour were, according to him, acceptable for Christians. Even monasteries and orphanages were places of licentiousness according to his account (*Tathbīt* 3:155-7, 286-301, 333-7). Since nothing was forbidden in a Sharia-like sense, everything seemed to be allowed.

Along these lines, ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s Islamic critique of Christianity is not only synchronic, but largely focuses on its history. This applies also to his critique of the sacred scriptures. He claims that the miracles of Christ and apostles were invented *long after* the era of the apostles; this in fact means that ‘Abd al-Jabbār has to locate the emergence of the existing Gospels and Acts in the second century, if not later. He claims that Christians produced eighty Gospels, and these were edited down until only four remained (*Tathbīt* 3:73-80).

Why, then, people did accept Christianity, in the view of Abū Qurrah? After excluding all possible rational or material reasons for it, there was little left for him to explain the existence of the phenomenon. Consequently he laid great stress on the miracles performed by Christ and his apostles. And thus in the end it is miracles that validate a religion; ‘the gospel



Excerpt from Theodor Abū Qurrah's apologetic works. The manuscript is copied in the Orthodox monastery of St. Chariton, Palestine, at the end of ninth century. Cod.arab. 1071, Bavarian State Library, Munich.

was accepted solely as a result of incomparable wonders' (B 74), Abū Qurrah proclaimed.

This was an unacceptable argument for 'Abd al-Jabbār who built his argument on the essential difference between the religion of Christ and Christianity (i.e. Roman paganism). In his demolition of the argument, 'Abd al-Jabbār did not refer to Christ or the apostles, but redefined the Christian position into a claim concerning miracles made by monks and nuns, which in terms of religious authority was easier for him to refute. In 'Abd al-Jabbār's paradigm, miracles may happen but they can only be performed by prophets. Therefore, 'Abd al-Jabbār refutes all Christian claims for miracles as false and fabricated (*Tathbit* 3:373-409).

The argumentation based on miracles is certainly not unproblematic. For us, and for 'Abd al-Jabbār, the problem lies in the dubiousness of miracles, but in the ninth century this was rather because miracles could be performed by anyone. Therefore, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, a ninth-century East Syrian apologist, mod-

ified the argument by defining the notion that miracles did indeed function as the actual proof of religions, but since there were various religions which could boast miracles, one must pay attention to the motives underlying acting for one's religion (Griffith 1983:161-5). This leads back to the argument of non-utilitarian motives of conversion.

Language and identity

Perhaps surprisingly, certain linguistic factors of early Christendom play a considerable role in the polemics. 'Abd al-Jabbār would hardly have come up with the topic unless he had heard it from Christians, or perhaps even got it directly from the works Abū Qurrah. The case is peculiar also in the sense that it represents an aspect of history that appears positive in Christian terms, as Theodore Abū Qurrah saw it, and the setting was not denied by al-Jabbār; he just identified it as a most negative development.

Specifically, *linguistic plurality* was an indication of positive evolution for Christians. Abū Qurrah presented the spread of Christianity into various languages as an indicator, proof and outcome of its divine origin. In fact, this was one of three basic arguments when he presented the characteristics of true religion. If God did not send his messengers to teach in native tongues, he would have no just claim to judge them, Abū Qurrah notes. On the contrary, he sent his messengers to 'all the nations of the world' (M 64), each apostle ending up in a different nation (B 73). The tradition may sound somewhat romantic, but at least it is not a late invention, for the same argument had already appeared in the *Apology* of Aristide of Athens in 120s (*Apol.* 2:4). Abū Qurrah, however, goes so far as to claim that five-sixths of humans have converted to Christianity (B 161). The details, however, may not be relevant for Abū Qurrah, and not even for our argument, but the basic idea is solid: Christianity is universal and for that reason multi-linguistic, and universalism pertains not only to geographical expansion but also to inherent openness and intrinsic readiness for cultural and linguistic adaption, integrally present in the religion itself.

How, then, did 'Abd al-Jabbār respond to the challenge? For him, the best way to defend Islam was to make a straightforward attack. He states plainly that the abandonment of Hebrew was a scandalous plot that took place in order to 'disguise the lies that they set down in writing'. 'Abd al-Jabbār mistakenly

believed that Hebrew was spoken in Christ's time, and he also seems to assume that Jews did not understand other languages, for he claims that the change of language was made in order to hide their plots so that the Jews 'would not understand their teachings' (*Tathbīt* 3:81–92). Correspondingly, he also seems to suppose – although not explicitly – that the original Gospel was given to Christ in Hebrew.

Such a stress on the importance of Hebrew is rather unique and original, and it has even led to a wild theory of the whole argument being based on a Jewish-Christian source (discussion in Reynolds 2004: 1–18). The most likely source for 'Abd al-Jabbār's vision of Christian history is indeed a Jewish work; a *Critique of Christian Origins*, by Dawud ibn Marwan, a convert from Christianity (Stroumsa 1989). The work offered a model of viewing Christianity as corruption of Judaism, which fits rather well with the Islamic paradigm of history. Moreover, it is rather obvious that insofar as 'Abd al-Jabbār's interpretation was his original thought, he could simply reflect the position of Arabic among Muslims and project it into the times of Christ. His view that Jews did not understand Greek gives an inkling of the experience of Muslims who did not understand the languages and scriptures of Christians, whether Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian or Armenian.

When it comes to language, both authors have their points. In spite of the exaggerations made by Abū Qurrah and several serious mistakes of 'Abd al-Jabbār, both are essentially right in viewing the broad strokes. The difference is paradigmatic. Abū Qurrah's axiom is that the truth is universal and not bound to any given language;⁸ the axiom of 'Abd al-Jabbār is that the Truth given by God is verbal and in one language, the form of which must be retained. It is also telling that the focus is set somewhat differently in the two authors' works: 'Abd al-Jabbār speaks about the Gospel as *revelation*, even if the true one has been lost, but for Abū Qurrah it is about *teaching* various nations. For 'Abd al-Jabbār, the Gospel is something sent from heaven, for Abū Qurrah, it is a human teaching and a sacred tradition about Christ. In Christianity, the Word (*Logos*) was not a text but a person.

8 Some Greek theologians might raise their eyebrows here, given the prestige of the Greek tradition, but the early Church was, especially in the East, more multi-lingual than is nowadays generally realised.

Power, violence and looting: proof or disproof?

Perhaps the most interesting question, after all, is the problem of divinely authorised and inspired warfare versus the religious pacifism shown by the first Christians.⁹ In our times, many scholars find it necessary to argue for the peaceful character of Islam and non-religious nature of the early Islamic conquests; 'Abd al-Jabbār would not agree with them at all.

For 'Abd al-Jabbār, an important proof and indicator of truth of Islam was the fact that Muhammad declared Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians unbelievers (*'ikfār*), shed their blood, captured their offspring, declared their property permissible for Muslims, took the *Jizya* tax and set down other humiliating measures (*Tathbīt* 2:265–8). The acts of killing, robbery and humiliation, and the miraculous fact that they were set down in the Qur'an even before Muhammad had means to accomplish them, were for 'Abd al-Jabbār signs of the divine truth of Islam.¹⁰ In other words, violence can be a positive and fundamental argument when it shows to whom God has given the power. Not surprisingly, for Abū Qurrah these very acts constitute a definite proof of the falsity of Muhammad's prophethood and consequently the falseness of Islam, although he does not state this in fully explicit terms (e.g. B 71).

Interestingly, 'Abd al-Jabbār also places some weight here on the fact that this all has happened against the will of Christians who 'longed for this never to have happened' (*Tathbīt* 2:269). This actually means that when Christians such as Abū Qurrah speculate negatively on the truthfulness of a killing and plundering prophet, their unhappy complaints are a new, secondary proof of the truth of Islam and the falsity of Christianity. Namely, they show that

9 The existence of Christian soldiers in the Roman army, often used as a kind of counter-argument, is in fact rather irrelevant, for they were in service of the other (i.e. the oppressors of Christianity). The ultimate proof for the pacifism of Christianity is rather the total lack of willingness to develop a Christian armed resistance over the centuries of persecution. The attention paid to the Christian soldiers of the Roman army in modern discussions is rather a reflection of a contemporary interest in individuals' freedom to choose professions than an expression of concern for the ethos of religion *per se*.

10 This line of thought seems to have been present in Islam from its beginnings; the only biblical phrase quoted in Qur'an (21:105) is Ps. 37:29: 'The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.'



Battle of Khaybar. The first Muslims attacking the Jewish community. Persian painting.

the Christians are anxious about the new reality and unable to do anything with it, since God has taken the power from them and handed it over to the Muslims.

In other words, Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār in this case more or less agree on the basic facts and events but entirely disagree about their meaning. They seem to be in a basic agreement concerning the events related to the Islamic conquest and Muhammad’s role. The disagreement concerns the possibility of combining prophethood with violent warfare and plundering. Moreover, this can be seen as an example of a wider question: can the pursuit of economic gain and outer success, especially if they are at the expense of others, be a religious act and a spiritually permissible intention, or not?

The difference is axiomatic in the uttermost sense. Abū Qurrah perceived history through lenses ground during centuries of Christian martyrdom and those of asceticism. Accordingly, the spread of Christianity, in spite of persecution and lack of any material gain, was for him a crucial proof of the truth of Christianity, and the acts of killing and plundering by the first Muslims shows that their community was simply misled. From the Islamic point of view, it was equally difficult to see why it should be admirable to suffer persecution, and why there should be any blessing inherent in the lack of material goods. In the eyes of ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the rapid conquest of the civilized world was an evident, and more reasonable, proof of divine blessing and authority.

Moreover, the preferences were reflected in how the history was read. ‘Abd al-Jabbār presented the divinely authorised use of violence as being part of the original religion, claiming that Moses ‘killed men and women opposed to him’. ‘Abd al-Jabbār argued

that the prophets were sent with the sword and Moses was permitted to ‘kill men and all women who had slept with a man, allowing [only] the virgins to remain alive’. Moreover, if the Christians’ custom of seeing the pre-existent Christ behind the Torah was correct, it would mean that it was Christ himself who had sent Moses and other prophets to kill (*Tathbīt* 3:582). This odd reasoning employs Christian ideas of the pre-existence of Christ and his presence in the biblical theophanies¹¹ as well as at the basis of the revelation – and indeed, of the whole of creation – in a way that is not devoid of logic, but the result was something unheard in Christianity.

How, then, to respond to the claim of the *peacefulness* of early Christian history? In ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s rewriting of it, the early history of Christianity became bloody and cruel. It is hard to avoid getting the impression that ‘Abd al-Jabbār projected here something of the earliest history of Islam¹² onto the history of the Church. For example, the creed of Nicea was imposed on people by Constantine, who simply ‘killed those who did not accept it’. All those who did not eat pork were killed. Therefore, everybody accepted the creed outwardly, but only for fear of the sword. For fifty years, according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Constantine killed those who refused to venerate the cross, including ‘all the philosophers’ (*Tathbīt* 3:205–11, 231–7). The argumentation oddly resembles a Christian caricature of the early history of Islam.

Subsequently, when ‘Abd al-Jabbār had deleted the first three Christian centuries from his history, he could proceed to claim that Christianity is more violent than any other religion. Brutal tyrannical kings have forced people to accept Christianity by ‘coercion, the sword, temptation and terror’, and the ‘sword of Christianity alone has been constantly carried

11 Theophanies of the Old Testament were interpreted in various ways by different Church fathers. Some saw the presence of the Logos itself in certain events such as among the angels in Mamre (see Justin the Martyr, *Dial. Trypho* 56:1, 56:6, 58:3, 126:5, and Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.* I, 2:7). Others preferred to define the same beings as angels through whom the divine presence spoke and acted.

12 That is to say, the attacks, raids and massacres carried out under the leadership of Muhammad, such as the massacre of Jews in Khaybar.

in iniquity from the beginning of its community until the present day' (*Tathbīt* 3:538, 542, cf. 3:495).

ʿAbd al-Jabbār constructed a double denial of the Christian view. First, he noted that the acts of violence, domination, plundering and humiliation perpetrated by Muhammad and his followers against Christians illustrate the truth and divine authority of Islam. Then, he denied that early Christian history was in any way better but was in fact most wicked, violent and coercive from its very beginnings. Nevertheless, in this case the facts of violence and suppression were not a sign of divine favour.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār never discussed the obvious logical contradiction of these two arguments: why is it that violence and coercion are proofs of falsehood in his imaginative reconstruction of early Christian history, but in the case of Islamic history, similar aspects speak for the religion's truthfulness and divine authority? This is of course not the only time in the history of religious confrontations that the arguments of one side seem to be in contradiction or essentially flawed. Still the contradiction is striking, for it is at the very core of his argument.

Relation of Judaism and Christianity

In his version of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, ʿAbd al-Jabbār sees all changes to have taken place for the worst. He does not even consider the possibility that there could be some evolution in religions. This, in turn, produces the curious outcome that if the principles of the corruption of religion that he uses in the case of Christianity were adopted into the history of Islam, the result would be in some respects rather difficult for him. ʿAbd al-Jabbār criticises heavily the fact that Christians revere the Torah but have abandoned its law (*Tathbīt* 3:31-46), but he does not seem to notice that the Muslims' situation in this respect is not much better. That is to say, their own position in relation to the same Torah is *de facto* even more negative, given that Islam accepts the Torah only as a rhetorical construction, as portrayed in the Qur'an, but rejects the actually existing book as being corrupted.

However, ʿAbd al-Jabbār was aware of the fact that Judaism and Islam had much more in common in matters of ritual law, such as circumcision or the prohibition of pork. Therefore, it was only logical for him to explain the transformation and the differences in the most negative terms. This makes his view of

early Judaism extremely positive, which is a curious side-outcome of his anti-Christian attack, certainly not 'Judeophilia' as such. However that may be, his views on the purity of Judaism would make useful reading in Islamic studies today.

ʿAbd al-Jabbār's logic is that whatever was not in use among the Jews at the time of Christ but is of later origin is wrong. In such a black-and-white paradigm, he must be selective, or misinformed. For example, he refutes the use of incense and icons by referring to their pagan origin, but in his critique, he does not realise that incense and visual imagery were present in the Temple cult from its very beginnings. Nevertheless, these arguments do serve to underline the truthful character of Judaism of that time.

Conclusions

To sum up, Abū Qurrah and ʿAbd al-Jabbār mostly look at the same facts from different perspectives and value them accordingly; at times, they appear to have a similar perspective, but then they are looking at different facts. The basic difference behind their evaluations is, to put it simply, that one appreciates weakness and asceticism, the other power and honour. The details are approached in the light of these paradigmatic positions. On a closer look, however, more nuances come into view. ʿAbd al-Jabbār even seems to admit, albeit implicitly, that if a religion spreads despite being persecuted and unprofitable, there is something inexplicable in the process. This is why he reconstructs the history of Christianity by deleting almost three centuries.

Both authors are in difficulties when estimating the nature of change in religious history. Abū Qurrah on the one hand stresses the purity of the earliest Christianity, and on the other hand he admits that there is evolution in Christendom, especially in the case of icons and aesthetics. He does not fully analyse the relation between these two notions, but apparently, he sees no contradiction here: Christianity itself was pure from the very beginning, but it took centuries to refine the people to appreciate its gentle values (forgiveness etc.) and aesthetic touch. As for ʿAbd al-Jabbār, he was in dire straits with the history of early Christendom. He had no access to historical facts, such as genuine data on the conversions, but only to the idealised version of Abū Qurrah and other apologists. Probably he sensed their version to be too good to be true and thus not credible, and this

in turn made it easier for him to construct his own version. Here one could even conclude that a more precise presentation of Christian history by Christian apologists might have made it more acceptable and perhaps softened the collision of thought-worlds somewhat.

There is something paradigmatic, however, that they both share. In modern discussions, religion is often understood as some kind of *pure spirituality* that is as it were *surrounded by its historical context*: a given religion is constituted in its obscure spiritual kernel, and then its historical dimensions are constituted and defined by secondary social, cultural, political and economic circumstances. For many, such a paradigm is something self-evident. Undoubtedly both Abū Qurrah and ‘Abd al-Jabbār would ridicule such a view: to rip history out of religion would leave nothing left, and that would obliterate the possibility of understanding religions in the first place. Both authors would agree that the truth lives in history, and the essence of religion is particularly clearly shown in its earliest phases of history, whether measured in terms of honour and strength, or those of weakness and asceticism. ■



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